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Both agencies want to restore wetlands to protect water resources; create a wildlife corridor for wide-ranging animals such as the Florida black bear and Florida panther; and help support working landscapes.

The two agencies are also targeting the same general area for investment, overlapping in Highlands and Okeechobee counties. The WRP funds also will be spent in Glades and Hendry counties. The Service's proposal includes Polk and Osceola counties.

Both programs are voluntary. Working with interested landowners, the two agencies would be able to offer the best options for permanent protection. Since WRP funds may only be spent on land where wetlands restoration is possible, a conservation easement with the Service may be the best option for some interested landowners. In other cases, the WRP easement may be more appropriate.

For more information and to submit questions and comments

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Proposed Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge and Conservation Area

Questions You May Have

What is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service proposing?

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) has proposed the establishment of the Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) and Conservation Area (Conservation Area) north of Lake Okeechobee in Polk, Osceola, Okeechobee and Highlands counties. Under the Draft Land Protection Plan and Draft Environmental Assessment, the Service would be able to purchase up to 50,000 acres of land in up to six different units to create the Everglades Headwaters NWR, and up to 100,000 acres of conservation easements across a much larger area to create the Conservation Area. By dispersing the refuge and conservation area, the Service would be able to work with partners to connect the existing protected lands for the benefit of people and wildlife.

What is a national wildlife refuge?

A national wildlife refuge is part of a network of habitats that is set aside to benefit wildlife, provide unparalleled outdoor experiences for all Americans, and protect a healthy environment. Wildlife refuges give wildlife top priority. Public access is a legally mandated priority for hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, photography, interpretation and environmental education, when those uses are compatible with refuge purposes.

Today, there are more than 553 national wildlife refuges and other units of the National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System), plus 38 wetland management districts.

What is a conservation area?

For this project, the term "conservation area" means land in which the Service would hold an easement or some other partial interest in the land. The primary purposes would be to prohibit future development and provide habitat for a variety of plants and animals. Ownership would remain with the private landowner, who would be able to continue using the land to farm, raise cattle, and for other purposes.



Why is the Service proposing to create a new refuge and conservation area in Florida?

As Florida continues to grow, the grasslands and savannas of Central Florida are under development pressure. Some of the threats to the globally unique species found here — and the rural way of life the landscape supports — include fragmented habitats and reduced water quality and quantity. As the nation's leading conservation agency for wildlife and habitat protection, the Service seeks to work with public and private land managers to create a cohesive vision for the landscape.

By creating a refuge and conservation area, the Service seeks to help sustain a working rural landscape of ranches and farms for future generations; safeguard water supplies for millions of Central and South Floridians; protect the headwaters of the Everglades; and conserve one of the nation's prime hotspots for biological diversity.

How would a refuge and conservation area be created?

This is a voluntary program. If the conservation focal area and conservation partnership area are approved by the Service's Director, the Service would work with its partners and willing landowners to establish the proposed 150,000-acre Everglades Headwaters NWR and Conservation Area. The Service could use several methods, including purchasing full or partial interest in land, leasing land, and setting aside land through habitat conservation plans, and/or cooperative agreements with willing landowners.

The Service would seek to purchase up to 50,000 acres for the Everglades Headwaters NWR. For the Conservation Area, the Service would seek to purchase up to 100,000 acres in conservation easements or partial interest in the land, which would remain privately owned.

What is the conservation partnership area?

The proposed conservation partnership area is a broad area of the Kissimmee River Valley within which the Service would be able to negotiate with willing sellers to create the conservation area by purchasing conservation easements or other partial interest in up to 100,000 acres.

The designation of a conservation partnership area would not give the Service any special jurisdiction or control over these lands. Lands would become part of the conservation area only when and if they are purchased from willing sellers or placed under agreements with willing participants. Some landowners may choose not to sell conservation easements or other partial interest in their lands, and those landowners would continue to own and manage their lands as before. Others may choose to sell, donate, or enter into special agreements, and their lands would be added to the conservation area and managed by the landowners under the conditions of their easements or other agreements.

By identifying a larger area than needed to acquire up to 100,000 acres for a conservation area, the Service would be able to respond to changing landowner interests, conditions and opportunities.

What is the conservation focal area?

This is the area of six units identified in blue on the map. This is where the Service would be authorized to negotiate with willing sellers to purchase up to 50,000 acres to create the Everglades Headwaters NWR.

The designation of a conservation focal area would not give the Service any special jurisdiction or control over these lands. Lands would become part of the Refuge System only when and if they are purchased from willing sellers or placed under agreements with willing participants. Some landowners may choose not to sell their land or a conservation easement, and those



landowners would continue to own and manage their lands as before. Others may choose to sell, donate, or enter into special agreements, and their lands would be added to the refuge. These lands could then be managed for the protection of wildlife and habitat.

By identifying a larger area than needed to acquire up to 50,000 acres for a refuge, the Service would be able to respond to changing landowner interests, conditions and opportunities.

What happens if my property is included in the conservation focal area and/or the conservation partnership area, and I don't want to sell?

Nothing. The Service will only purchase lands and conservation easements from willing sellers. You would be largely unaffected by the establishment of a new boundary or conservation focal area, except for the fact that you might have the Service as a neighbor. Even if refuge lands were to surround private property, legal access to the private property would be maintained.

How would the Service prioritize land acquisition, both for the refuge and conservation area?

Working with willing sellers, the Service would consider four criteria in determining which lands to protect first.

- Would buying the land — or a conservation easement on the land — connect existing conservation lands and create a wildlife corridor for plants and animals?

- Does the land consist of high quality habitats for rare, threatened and/or endangered species?
- Does the land contain wetlands that could be restored to improve water quality and water storage in the Everglades watershed?
- Would purchasing the land enable the Service to provide wildlife-dependent outdoor recreation and education?

If I were to sell a conservation easement to the Service, what would I NOT be able to do on my land?

Any restrictions on your land would be agreed upon by you and the Service. In all cases, the Service is interested in acquiring development rights. Generally, on the portion of land that contains an easement, you and any subsequent owner would not be able to develop it or sell it for the purpose of developing it. You also would not be able to: (1) alter the natural topography or the natural water regime; (2) use your land in a way that damages the floral and fauna communities; or (3) convert native habitats to another use.

If the refuge and conservation area are created, would I be able to use it for activities such as hunting, fishing, hiking or bird watching?

As soon as practically possible, the Service plans to open the refuge to public access. As outlined in the 1997 National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act, the Service gives priority consideration to six wildlife-dependent public uses on national wildlife refuges. The uses are: hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, photography, environmental education, and interpretation. The Service is working with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission to co-manage any refuge lands as a State wildlife management area.

The conservation area would remain in private ownership. Those landowners would not be required to open their properties to the public. They could continue to use their land for their own recreational purposes.

Would I be allowed to operate an airboat on the proposed refuge?

Airboat operation is allowed on the State's sovereign waters, even if those waters are inside a national wildlife refuge.

Would land use and zoning change within the refuge boundary?

Zoning and land use regulations would continue under the jurisdiction of the appropriate local government.

How would tax revenues be affected if lands become part of the National Wildlife Refuge System?

The Federal Government does not pay property tax on land it owns, but two factors help offset this potential hardship to communities. First, refuge lands demand very little in the way of services or infrastructure from local government. Second, refuges generate jobs and tourism dollars, primarily from hunting, fishing and wildlife observation. Third, under the provisions of the Refuge Revenue Sharing Act (Public Law 95-469), the Service annually reimburses counties to compensate for revenue lost as a result of acquisition of private property.

Payments under this Act would be made only on lands which the Service acquires in fee title. On lands where the Service acquires only partial interest through easement, all taxes would remain the responsibility of the individual landowner.

An example of how this has worked is at the nearby Lake Wales Ridge National Wildlife Refuge. In 2009, the Refuge Revenue Sharing payments were more than \$13 an acre to Highlands and Polk counties. By comparison, a private ranch in Polk County is expected to pay less than \$2 per acre this year.

How would the refuge and conservation area be funded, and how long would it take to establish?

The Service draws funding for land acquisition from the Migratory Bird Conservation Fund and the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF). The



Everglades Headwaters proposal would most likely be funded through the LWCF, which is mainly derived from the sale of offshore oil leases and is intended for land conservation. If the Everglades Headwaters NWR and Conservation Area is approved, it could be established quickly with the very first donation or sale of land, no matter how small.

However, because this is a voluntary program, it could take many years of working with willing landowners for the Service to acquire the majority of the land and conservation easements as envisioned in the proposal. It's possible that the Service would be unable to acquire 100 percent of the proposed land and conservation easements.

What is the Greater Everglades Partnership Initiative?

This is a land conservation partnership that the Service helped start two years ago in an effort to bring together federal, tribal, state, and local governments; ranchers and other landowners; non-governmental conservation organizations; and other stakeholders to protect, restore, and conserve key areas in south Florida, from Disney World to the Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge. This largely rural area is one of the great grassland and savanna landscapes in eastern North America, and includes much of Florida's remaining intact wilderness and working ranch land.

The proposed Everglades Headwaters NWR and Conservation Area is the first, specific proposal resulting from the partnership.

How does this proposal impact the ongoing Everglades restoration efforts started by the State of Florida and the Federal government?

The Everglades Headwaters proposal builds on years of work by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, South Florida Water Management District, and many others. Conserving the Everglades' headwaters is a critical building block toward full restoration. The water that flows off the land in the proposed conservation partnership area drains into Lake Okeechobee, a major source of the water flowing through the River of Grass. By conserving this land, we can improve the quality and quantity of water for millions of Central and South Floridians. The Service's proposal also supports the second goal of Everglades restoration: to restore wildlife habitat and protect rare species.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) recently announced plans to spend \$100 million through the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) to acquire permanent easements from eligible landowners in the Northern Everglades Watershed. Is this project related to the Service's proposal?

While the two projects are separate, the WRP program and the Service's proposal are complimentary and share similarities. The Service and NRCS are currently discussing ways that the two agencies can work together, as many of our goals overlap.